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Russia's use of nuclear threats during the Ukraine conflict

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1

Summary

President Putin has increasingly used the threat of the Russian nuclear arsenal to pressurise the West over its military and diplomatic support for Ukraine following Russia's invasion in February 2022.

As part of this campaign of nuclear pressure, Russia has placed its weapons on heightened alert, tested and deployed new nuclear capabilities, threatened to resume nuclear testing, and suspended participation in a key nuclear arms control treaty with the US.

In March 2023 [Russia said it would deploy tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus](#). This is the first time that Russia has deployed nuclear weapons outside of the country since the collapse of the Soviet Union. While not a direct violation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, some have argued that, [like NATO nuclear sharing agreements, the decision contravenes the spirit of the NPT](#).

In November 2024, President Putin also approved an update to Russia's nuclear doctrine which many experts argue has lowered the threshold for nuclear use.

The [US and NATO have called Russia's increasing nuclear rhetoric over the conflict in Ukraine "irresponsible"](#). China has called for restraint and said that [the use, or threat of use of nuclear weapons should be opposed](#).

2

Increasing nuclear rhetoric

Russia is the largest nuclear weapon state in the world. As of March 2024, Russia was estimated to have a total inventory of 5,580 warheads, including a significant non-strategic nuclear arsenal of approximately 1,558 warheads.¹

President Putin has increasingly used the threat of the Russian nuclear arsenal to pressurise the West over its military and diplomatic support for Ukraine following Russia's invasion in February 2022. Russia has placed its weapons on heightened alert, tested and deployed new nuclear-capable delivery systems, threatened to resume nuclear testing, and suspended participation in a key nuclear arms control treaty with the US (see box 1).

¹ Nonstrategic nuclear weapons are often referred to as tactical, or battlefield, nuclear weapons as they are lower yield intended for use within a limited battlefield context. Many delivery systems for non-strategic nuclear weapons are also dual-capable (they can be equipped with either a conventional or nuclear warhead) which provides a level of uncertainty over their exact numbers and deployment. SIPRI, [World Yearbook 2024: World Nuclear Forces \(PDF\)](#)

Among the more significant moves in this campaign of nuclear pressure, has been the announcement that Russian tactical nuclear weapons will be deployed in Belarus and the publication of a new Russian nuclear doctrine, which many analysts argue lowers the threshold for nuclear use (see [Movement of tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus](#) and [A new Russian nuclear doctrine](#)).

President Putin's threats have largely been considered rhetoric, however, as various "red lines" have been crossed during the conflict, but not matched by any visible efforts to deploy Russia's nuclear weapons in response.² However, several analysts have noted the impact on Western audiences who fear nuclear escalation.³ The question of whether Russia could resort to the use of tactical nuclear weapons on the battlefield in Ukraine has also invariably arisen over the last three years of the conflict.⁴

Members of the G7, including nuclear powers France, the US and UK, have called Russia's nuclear posturing "irresponsible" and "unacceptable".⁵ In June 2023, former NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg condemned Russia's "reckless nuclear rhetoric", a view that has since been shared by the new Secretary General Mark Rutte.⁶

Without directly referencing Russia, the Chinese President Xi Jinping has said that nuclear weapons must not be used in Ukraine:

Under the current circumstances, the international community should support all efforts conducive to the peaceful settlement of the Ukraine crisis and call on relevant parties to remain rational and exercise restraint, start direct engagement as quickly as possible, and create conditions for the resumption of talks; oppose the use of or the threat to use nuclear weapons, advocate that nuclear weapons cannot be used and that nuclear wars must not be fought, and prevent a nuclear crisis in Eurasia...⁷

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- ² RUSI Commentary, "[Putin is a nuclear bully](#)", 1 March 2022; Congressional Research Service, [Russia's nuclear weapons: doctrine, forces and modernization](#) (PDF), 21 April 2022; "[Nuclear brinkmanship in Putin's war: Upping the ante](#)", Brookings Institution, 14 May 2024 and NATO, [Press conference by incoming Secretary General](#), 1 October 2024
- ³ Gustav Gressel, "[Shadow of the bomb: Russia's nuclear threats](#)", European Council on Foreign Relations, July 2022
- ⁴ Dr Patricia Lewis, Chatham House, "[How likely is the use of nuclear weapons by Russia?](#)", 1 March 2022; "[Putin: The psychology of nuclear brinkmanship](#)", Foreign Affairs, 30 May 2023 and "[Could Russia really play nuclear roulette in Ukraine?](#)", BBC News, 22 June 2023
- ⁵ Downing Street, [G7 Leaders statement](#), 12 December 2022; US Department of Defense, [Press briefing](#), 19 November 2024; PA Media, [@PA](#), X (formerly Twitter), 19 November 2024 (accessed 19 December 2024) and Prime Minister's Office, [PM Statement to the House of Commons on the G20 and COP29 summits](#), 21 November 2024
- ⁶ NATO, [Press conference](#), 16 June 2023 and NATO, [Press conference by incoming Secretary General](#), 1 October 2024
- ⁷ "[Xi meets German Chancellor Olaf Scholz](#)", Xinhua Chinese News Agency, 5 November 2022 and "[Xi Jinping warned Vladimir Putin against nuclear attack in Ukraine](#)", The Financial Times, 5 July 2023

Nuclear state India has also warned Russia about the possible use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine, calling the prospect one that “goes against the basic tenets of humanity”.⁸

In November 2024, US defence intelligence officials were reported in the media to have assessed that a Russian attack using nuclear weapons remained “unlikely”,⁹ an assessment shared by the UK’s Chief of the Defence Staff Admiral Sir Tony Radakin.¹⁰

More detail on Russia’s nuclear capabilities, including the new nuclear-capable delivery systems that are being fielded, is available in Library research briefing, [Nuclear weapons profile: Russia](#).

1 Brief timeline of Russian nuclear pressure

President Putin, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Dmitry Medvedev, Deputy Chairman of the Russian Security Council, frequently refer to Russia’s nuclear arsenal within the context of Ukraine.¹¹ Among the more prominent statements and actions are:

- 24 February 2022 – President Putin warned against any interference in Ukraine from outside or of a direct attack on Russia and said Russia would respond immediately and the consequences would be “such as you have never seen in your entire history”.¹²
- 27 February 2022 - President Putin orders Russian nuclear forces to move to a heightened status of alert. Putin said he was issuing this order in response to escalating economic sanctions and “aggressive statements” being issued by the West following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.¹³
- 20 April 2022 – Russia tests its new Sarmat intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), although the US was pre-notified of the test under the terms of the New START treaty.¹⁴
- 12 May – Medvedev says NATO military aid to Ukraine risks conflict with Russia and “fully fledged nuclear war”.¹⁵

⁸ [“India warns Russia against use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine”](#), India Today, 26 October 2022

⁹ [“Nuclear attack unlikely despite Putin’s warnings, US intelligence says”](#), Reuters, 27 November 2024

¹⁰ Ministry of Defence, [Chief of the Defence Staff RUSI lecture](#), 4 December 2024

¹¹ See for example [“Nuclear rhetoric and escalation management in Russia’s war against Ukraine”](#) (PDF), SWP Working Paper, September 2022 for a chronology of nuclear threats in the first six months of the conflict.

¹² President of Russia, [Address by the President of the Russian Federation](#), 24 February 2022

¹³ TASS, [“Putin orders special service regime in Russia’s deterrence force”](#), 27 February 2022

¹⁴ The development of Russia’s new ICBM is examined in Library paper, [Nuclear weapons at a glance: Russia](#)

¹⁵ “Dmitry Medvedev warns of Russia-NATO nuclear war over Western help”, The Times, 12 May 2022

- 21 September 2022 – In an address to the nation President Putin says that in the event of a threat to the territorial integrity of Russia, “we will certainly make use of all weapon systems available to us. This is not a bluff”.¹⁶
- 30 September 2022 and 16 June 2023 – President Putin makes reference to the use of nuclear weapons in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, suggesting that the US had “created a precedent”.¹⁷
- February 2023 – Russia suspends its participation in the New START treaty, threatens to resume nuclear testing and places new nuclear capabilities on combat duty, although does not specify which capabilities.¹⁸ The New START treaty, which is the only bilateral arms control treaty limiting the strategic nuclear arsenals of the US and Russia, expires in 2026.
- 25 March 2023 – Russia announces that it will deploy tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus (see [Movement of tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus](#)).
- June 2023 – Russia restates that a return to New START would only be possible if the US abandoned its “fundamentally hostile policy toward the Russian Federation”.¹⁹
- 21 June 2023 – President Putin confirms that the new Sarmat ICBM (Satan II) would be placed on combat duty “in the near future”.²⁰
- October 2023- The Russian Parliament passes legislation de-ratifying the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). The legislation is signed into law by President Putin in November 2023.²¹
- February 2024- In his annual address to the Federal Assembly, President Putin says that Russia’s strategic nuclear forces are on full combat alert and “the ability to use them is assured”.²²
- March 2024 – In an interview with Russian state TV, President Putin says Russia was prepared for nuclear war and that its nuclear capabilities were more advanced than its nuclear peers.²³
- May 2024 - Russia announces that it will conduct exercises to test the readiness of its non-strategic/tactical nuclear forces in a combat

¹⁶ President of Russia, [Address by the President of the Russian Federation](#), 21 September 2022

¹⁷ President of Russia, [Signing of treaties on accession](#), 30 September 2022 and [Plenary Session of the St Petersburg International Economic Forum](#), 16 June 2023

¹⁸ President of Russia, [Presidential Address to Federal Assembly](#), 21 February 2023

¹⁹ [“Russia, US recently held direct consultations on New START”](#), TASS Russian News Agency, 15 June 2023

²⁰ President of Russia, [Meeting with top graduates of higher military schools](#), 21 June 2023

²¹ President of Russia, [Law revoking the ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty](#), 2 November 2023

²² President of Russia, [Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly](#), 29 February 2024

²³ President of Russia, [Interview to Dmitry Kiselev](#), 13 March 2024

scenario. The exercises, which were the first of its kind, were announced in direct response to what Russia described as “highly destabilising actions” by NATO states, including suggestions that Western troops should be deployed on the ground in Ukraine and giving permission to Ukraine to use Western-supplied equipment to strike targets in Russian territory.²⁴ The Ukrainian Government called the exercises “nuclear blackmail”.²⁵

- September 2024 – President Putin announces that changes to Russia’s nuclear doctrine are under consideration (see [A new Russian nuclear doctrine](#)).²⁶
- November 2024 – [President Putin formally approves Russia’s new nuclear doctrine](#), on the same day that US authorisation is given for Ukraine to use US-supplied long-range missiles against targets in Russia.
- November 2024 – Russia uses a new experimental hypersonic ballistic missile (codename Oreshnik), against targets in Ukraine. The “combat test” of the Oreshnik was said to be in direct response to the use of US and UK-supplied long-range missiles against targets in Russia.²⁷ In December President Lukashenko suggested that the Oreshnik [could be deployed at various sites in Belarus](#) in 2025. It remains unclear whether Oreshnik is nuclear-capable.²⁸

3 Movement of tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus

In March 2023, President Putin announced that Russian tactical nuclear weapons, which are lower yield nuclear warheads designed for use on the battlefield, will be deployed in Belarus.

²⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, [Statement](#), 6 May 2024

²⁵ [“Putin rattles his atomic sabre by ordering nuclear weapons drills”](#), Politico, 6 May 2024

²⁶ President of Russia, [Meeting of the Security Council standing conference on nuclear deterrence](#), 25 September 2024

²⁷ President of Russia, [Statement by the President of the Russian Federation](#), 21 November 2024. See also [“Russia’s hypersonic missile attack was an attempt at blackmail”](#), Carnegie Politika, 29 November 2024

²⁸ The Oreshnik is examined in greater detail in Library research briefing, [Nuclear weapons profile: Russia](#)

3.1

Post-Soviet nuclear status of Belarus

Belarus is a non-nuclear weapon state under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in late 1991 left Soviet nuclear weapons stationed on the territory of four newly independent states - Russia, Kazakhstan, Ukraine and Belarus.

Between them, Kazakhstan, Ukraine and Belarus inherited over 3,000 strategic nuclear weapons, in addition to an estimated 3,000 tactical nuclear warheads. Ukraine became the third largest nuclear weapons state in the world.

Table 1 Nuclear weapons in Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine, 1991

	Strategic warheads	Non-strategic warheads
Belarus	100	725
Kazakhstan	1,410	N/K
Ukraine	1,900	2,275

Source: Robert S. Norris, "The Soviet Nuclear Archipelago," *Arms Control Today*, January/February 1992, p. 24 and Joseph Cirincione, et al., *Deadly Arsenals*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005, p. 366.

The Lisbon Protocol

Despite never having had operational control over Soviet nuclear weapons,²⁹ the uncertain fate of the former Soviet nuclear arsenal raised serious concerns within the international community and subsequently prompted talks between the US, Russia and the three newly independent states.

In May 1992 they concluded the [Lisbon Protocol](#) to the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I), a bilateral nuclear arms reduction treaty which the US and Russia had previously agreed in July 1991.³⁰ Under the Protocol all four former Soviet states became parties to the START treaty. It was also agreed that Russia would remain the only nuclear weapon state and that Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine would relinquish their inherited nuclear arsenals and return them to Russia. The Protocol also committed those states

²⁹ This is discussed in: Cheryl Rofer, "[Could Ukraine have retained Soviet nuclear weapons?](#)", *Nuclear Diner*, 6 February 2022

³⁰ More information on START I is available in Library briefing CBP8421, [Prospects for US-Russian Nuclear Arms Control](#)

to accede to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) as non-nuclear weapon states “in the shortest time possible”.

In December 1994, Belarus, Russia, the UK and the United States also signed the [Memorandum of Security Assurances in connection with the Republic of Belarus Accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons](#) (PDF). Parallel memorandums were also signed with Kazakhstan and [Ukraine](#) (PDF) (what is often referred to as the 1994 Budapest Memorandum). Albeit not formal treaties, the agreements, established in accordance with the [1975 Helsinki Accords](#), provided security assurances against the “threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence” of each country, in exchange for their full nuclear disarmament and accession to the NPT.

Belarus formally ratified START in February 1993 and acceded to the NPT in July 1993. It completed the withdrawal of nuclear weapons from its territory in November 1996.

As a non-nuclear weapon state under the NPT, Belarus has committed not to receive the transfer of, or control over, nuclear weapons, and not to manufacture or otherwise acquire nuclear weapons.³¹

3.2 Proposals for nuclear basing in Belarus

In the 1990s Russia and Belarus signed a series of treaties which proposed greater political and economic integration between the two countries. They culminated in the signing of the [Treaty on the Establishment of the Union State](#) in December 1999.³²

Greater cooperation within the defence and security sphere has been a key part of that integration and in November 2021 a new military doctrine for the Union State was adopted. That doctrine identifies NATO as the most important challenge to the security of the Union State and, as such, deeper military integration and the expansion of the Russian military presence in Belarus to counter the alleged threats posed by NATO on its borders is widely anticipated.³³ The doctrine doesn't address the issue of nuclear weapons being deployed in Belarus, but as some commentators noted, the doctrine “doesn't say anything about a ban on it either”.³⁴

³¹ United Nations, [Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty](#), Article II

³² For a history of development of the Union State, see [An ever closer union?](#), Clingendael Institute, August 2021

³³ See [“New military doctrine of the Union State of Belarus and Russia”](#), Polish Institute of International Affairs, February 2022

³⁴ [“New Union military doctrine of Belarus and Russia revealed”](#), Belsat, 10 February 2022

Changes to the Belarusian constitution

In November 2021 President Lukashenko publicly offered to host Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus.³⁵

That offer was followed in December 2021 by proposals to amend Belarus' constitution. In addition to proposals to extend Lukashenko's time in office and give him lifelong immunity from prosecution, the constitutional changes would remove the country's commitment to neutrality and its status as a nuclear weapons free zone.³⁶

That constitutional change was approved in a referendum in February 2022, thereby rescinding the non-nuclear status Belarus adopted in 1994 and paving the way for any future decision to station Russian nuclear forces in the country.

Iskander-M missiles and re-roling of the Su-25

During a meeting with President Putin in June 2022, President Lukashenko once again raised the issue of nuclear basing, seemingly as an "equivalent response" to NATO nuclear exercises.³⁷

In what was a carefully choreographed announcement, President Putin responded to that request by announcing that Belarus' Su-25 aircraft would be re-equipped to take on a nuclear, as well as conventional, role (also referred to as dual capable) and that a requisite training programme for Belarusian pilots should also begin.³⁸ He also announced the transfer of Iskander-M short-range (up to 500km) tactical missiles to Belarus, which are capable of being used in either a conventional or nuclear role.³⁹

Kremlin spokesperson, Dmitry Peskov clarified the next day that the announcement did not, however, confirm the movement of nuclear weapons to Belarus.⁴⁰

³⁵ ["Belarus President offers to host Russian nuclear weapons"](#), Associated Press, 30 November 2021

³⁶ ["Belarus seeks to amend its constitution to host Russian nuclear weapons"](#), International Institute for Strategic Studies, 4 February 2022

³⁷ President of Russia, [Meeting with President Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus](#), 25 June 2022. NATO conducts an annual nuclear deterrence exercise: Steadfast Noon, in the autumn. NATO has referred to it as a "recurring training activity" which is "not linked to current world events". The most recent exercise was in October 2022 (NATO, [Press release](#), 14 October 2022)

³⁸ The choice of the Su-25, as opposed to the more modern Su-35 which Belarus also possesses, is thought to have been based on the fact that the Su-25 was originally produced with a nuclear capability, thereby making conversion faster and cheaper (See ["Russia is deploying nuclear weapons in Belarus: NATO shouldn't take the bait"](#), Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, 24 April 2023)

³⁹ Since 2016, Russia has also had the Iskander-M deployed in the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad on the borders of Poland and Lithuania (["Iskander-M in Kaliningrad: The changing equations of deterrence"](#), Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, 9 November 2016)

⁴⁰ ["Putin did not tell Lukashenko about the transfer of nuclear missiles to Minsk, Petrov said"](#), RIA Novosti, 28 June 2022 (in Russian)

3.3

Deployment of nuclear weapons in Belarus

In March 2023 President Putin provided an update on those plans. In an interview with Russian news channel Rossiya-24, President Putin said that, at the request of Belarus, Russia would deploy tactical nuclear weapons in the country.⁴¹ This is the first time that Russia will have deployed nuclear weapons outside of the country since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

He confirmed that ten Belarusian Su-25 aircraft had been converted to the nuclear role and that the Iskander-M dual capable missile system was already deployed in the country. Training would commence in April and a new nuclear weapons storage facility would be completed in July 2023.

However, President Putin also went on to state that under the nuclear sharing agreement the use of such weapons would remain under Russian control.⁴²

In taking this decision, Putin said that it reflected the practice of the United States in its nuclear sharing agreements⁴³ and that in doing so, Russia was not violating its international obligations on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons (see below).⁴⁴

President Putin also suggested that the decision was in response to the UK's provision of depleted uranium shells to Ukraine, which, he asserted, are "somehow connected with nuclear technology".⁴⁵ In previous statements President Putin has equated the provision of depleted uranium shells to the use of weapons "with a nuclear component".⁴⁶

In a speech to the St Petersburg International Economic Forum on 16 June 2023, President Putin confirmed that the first delivery of tactical nuclear

⁴¹ ["Russia to deploy its tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus at request of Minsk, says Putin"](#), TASS Russian News Agency, 25 March 2023.

⁴² ["Russia to deploy its tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus at request of Minsk, says Putin"](#), TASS Russian News Agency, 25 March 2023. This point was reiterated by Russian Defence Minister, Sergei Shoigu in May 2023: ["Moscow to remain in control of Russian nukes deployed in Belarus – defense chief Shoigu"](#), TASS Russian News Agency, 25 May 2023

⁴³ The US has had nuclear weapons deployed in Europe since the 1950s. It currently has an estimated 100 tactical nuclear weapons (B-61 gravity bombs) deployed in five NATO countries: Belgium, Germany, Netherlands, Italy and Turkey. The US withdrew its tactical nuclear weapons from Greece in 2001 and the UK in 2008 (See ["Nuclear weapons in Europe: Mapping US and Russian deployments"](#), Council on Foreign Relations, 30 March 2023)

⁴⁴ ["Russia to deploy its tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus at request of Minsk, says Putin"](#), TASS Russian News Agency, 25 March 2023

⁴⁵ ["Russia to deploy its tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus at request of Minsk, says Putin"](#), TASS Russian News Agency, 25 March 2023.

⁴⁶ President of Russia, [Press statements by President of Russia and President of China](#), 21 March 2023. Depleted uranium is a waste by-product of the uranium enrichment process. It has been used by the military since the 1970s as a component in heavy tank armour and for use in armour piercing munitions. Depleted uranium shells are not nuclear weapons as the radioactive material is not used to produce a nuclear reaction and explosion.

weapons to Belarus had been made.⁴⁷ He went on to suggest that further warheads would be delivered by the end of the year.⁴⁸

Although not publicly disclosed, the Su-25 is thought to be deployed at the Lida air base in western Belarus, close to the Lithuanian border.⁴⁹ Commentators have speculated that the Iskander-M could be deployed either at Lida or at Postavy air base, also close to the Lithuanian border in the north-west of the country.⁵⁰

3.4

Does this contravene the NPT?

There is a longstanding debate as to whether nuclear sharing contravenes Articles I and II of the NPT.⁵¹

2 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, Articles I and II

Article I

Each nuclear-weapon State Party to the Treaty undertakes not to transfer to any recipient whatsoever nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices or control over such weapons or explosive devices directly, or indirectly; and not in any way to assist, encourage, or induce any non-nuclear-weapon State to manufacture or otherwise acquire nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices, or control over such weapons or explosive devices.

Article II

Each non-nuclear-weapon State Party to the Treaty undertakes not to receive the transfer from any transferor whatsoever of nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices or of control over such weapons or explosive devices directly, or indirectly; not to manufacture or otherwise acquire nuclear

⁴⁷ President of Russia, [Plenary session of the St Petersburg International Economic Forum](#), 16 June 2023

⁴⁸ President of Russia, [Plenary session of the St Petersburg International Economic Forum](#), 16 June 2023

⁴⁹ [“Russia is deploying nuclear weapons in Belarus: NATO shouldn’t take the bait”](#), Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, 24 April 2023

⁵⁰ [“Russia is deploying nuclear weapons in Belarus: NATO shouldn’t take the bait”](#), Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, 24 April 2023

⁵¹ This issue was debated extensively in the 1990s within the context of the indefinite extension of the NPT. See, for example: [“NATO: Nuclear sharing or proliferation?”](#) (PDF), BASIC/Oxford Research Group, 2005 and [“NATO nuclear sharing and the NPT – questions to be answered”](#), Berlin Information Center for Transatlantic Security, June 1997. It has also been raised more recently within the context of the new [Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons \(TPNW\)](#). See, [“NATO’s nuclear sharing arrangements revisited in light of the NPT and TPNW”](#), Journal of Conflict and Security Law, Winter 2021

weapons or other nuclear explosive devices; and not to seek or receive any assistance in the manufacture of nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices.

While the NPT refers to a prohibition on the transfer of nuclear weapons, and implicit in that the control of such weapons and access to nuclear technologies, the treaty does not explicitly forbid the stationing of nuclear weapons in non-nuclear, allied states.

The US has long justified NATO's policy of nuclear sharing on an interpretation of the NPT which argues that US allies do not have ownership or command and control of the nuclear weapons deployed in their countries, and therefore no transfer violation exists.⁵² NATO has also argued that nuclear sharing pre-dates the NPT (agreed in 1968) and therefore this a moot point.⁵³

Nevertheless, there is also a school of thought that, while not a direct violation of the treaty in practice, it does contravene the treaty in spirit as allies have the capacity to deliver a nuclear warhead and undertake annual deterrence exercises (see above).⁵⁴

NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept, which sets out the fundamental roles and purpose of the alliance, acknowledges the importance of nuclear sharing:

NATO's nuclear deterrence posture also relies on the United States' nuclear weapons forward-deployed in Europe and the contributions of Allies concerned. National contributions of dual-capable aircraft to NATO's nuclear deterrence mission remain central to this effort.⁵⁵

Russia has long criticised the US for the stationing of nuclear weapons in Europe, having previously called it a direct violation of the NPT and insisting that all nuclear weapons be deployed within national territories.⁵⁶ Indeed, Russia and China highlighted this latter point at a summit between President Putin and President Xi Jinping in March 2023, and only days before the announcement that Russia would deploy tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus.⁵⁷

Russia's decision therefore represents a significant change in its nuclear policies and, while not a direct violation of the NPT, the same arguments

⁵² US Office of the Historian, [Letter from the Under Secretary of State to Secretary of Defense Clifford](#), 10 April 1968

⁵³ NATO, [NATO-Russia relations: The facts](#) (accessed 28 June 2023)

⁵⁴ ["Nuclear sharing in NATO, is it legal?"](#), Berlin Information Center for Transatlantic Security, April 2001

⁵⁵ NATO, Strategic Concept 2022, para.29

⁵⁶ ["The NPT and the origins of NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements" \(PDF\)](#), Institut français des relations internationales, February 2017

⁵⁷ ["Russia, China convinced that nuclear war must never be unleashed – joint statement"](#), TASS Russian News Agency, 21 March 2023

about “bad faith implementation” of the treaty could arguably now also be applied to Russia and Belarus.⁵⁸

3.5

What has been the response?

Russia already has Iskander-M dual-capable missiles deployed in Kaliningrad and it is widely assumed that nuclear weapons are stationed there.⁵⁹ The deployment of the Iskander missile system to Belarus therefore does little to extend Russia's nuclear reach into Europe, although from an operational perspective having nuclear capable systems in multiple places is recognised as enhancing Russia's nuclear deterrence.⁶⁰ Several analysts also questioned the use of the Su-25 for the nuclear role, despite conversion being faster and cheaper (see [footnote 38](#)), given that the Su-25 is an ageing close air support fighter.⁶¹

What is widely accepted is that the announcement of the deployment of nuclear weapons in Belarus is not a surprise, having been on the cards since the end of 2021. On that basis, Russia's announcements have been widely regarded by western analysts as political posturing and one more step in President Putin's campaign of nuclear intimidation vis-à-vis NATO and its support for Ukraine.⁶²

The timing of Russia's announcements also notably coincided with the approval of [a new Strategic Concept for NATO](#) (in June 2022) and [the adoption of new regional plans](#) that will enhance NATO's readiness and presence on its eastern flank (which were subsequently approved at the NATO summit in Vilnius in early July 2023).

What did the US and NATO say?

Despite President Biden suggesting that the nuclear threat from Russia is “real”,⁶³ on 16 June 2023, the US Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, said that

⁵⁸ [“Russia is deploying nuclear weapons in Belarus: NATO shouldn't take the bait”](#), Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, April 2023

⁵⁹ See [“Lithuanian officials puzzled by Russia's threats to deploy nuclear weapons in Kaliningrad”](#), LRT, 14 April 2022 and [“Why is Kaliningrad at the center of a new Russia-NATO faceoff?”](#), Brookings Institution, June 2022

⁶⁰ [“Russia-Belarus nuclear sharing would mirror NATO's – and worsen Europe's security”](#), Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists”, 1 July 2022

⁶¹ [“Russia is deploying nuclear weapons in Belarus: NATO shouldn't take the bait”](#), Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, April 2023

⁶² See: [“Russia-Belarus nuclear sharing would mirror NATO's – and worsen Europe's security”](#), Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists”, 1 July 2022; [“The insignificance of Putin's latest nuclear bluster”](#), European Council on Foreign Relations, 31 March 2023 and Kier Giles, [Russian nuclear intimidation](#), 29 March 2023

⁶³ [“Biden says threat of using tactical nuclear weapons is ‘real’”](#), Reuters, 20 June 2023

the US saw no reason to adjust its own nuclear posture in response to the deployment of Russian tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus:

We'll continue to monitor the situation very closely and very carefully. We have no reason to adjust our own nuclear posture. We don't see any indications that Russia is preparing to use a nuclear weapon. The President said again this week that we remain committed to the defense of NATO – every inch of its territory – so that is our north star and we're very focused on that.⁶⁴

This view was mirrored by NATO. In March 2023 the alliance condemned Russia's nuclear rhetoric as “dangerous and irresponsible” and said it was closely monitoring the situation.⁶⁵ Following a meeting of NATO Defence Ministers on 16 June 2023, then NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said:

On Belarus, I will not go into the detail, except for saying that, of course, we take it seriously when Russia has announced they will deploy nuclear weapons to Belarus. We have seen some preparations going on. We will monitor closely what they are doing and we will remain vigilant. And of course, this is part of nuclear messaging and nuclear rhetoric that we have seen over some time, a part of a pattern we have seen over several years, where Russia has modernised nuclear weapons, deployed more nuclear weapons – also up in the High North – but now also for the first time permanently deploying weapons to Belarus.

So far, we haven't seen any changes in the Russian nuclear posture, deployments, which requires any changes in our posture, but we will constantly assess what to do, and this was also one of the issues discussed in the Nuclear Planning Group today.⁶⁶

The then EU High Representative, Josep Borell, also condemned Russia's decision which he said went against all commitments undertaken in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum and was a “step which will lead to further extremely dangerous escalation”.⁶⁷ In March 2023, Borrell indicated that in the face of such a threat to European security, the EU could respond with further sanctions.⁶⁸

Position of the British Government

In March 2023, the UK's Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations, James Kariuki, said:

since the beginning of Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, President Putin has used irresponsible nuclear rhetoric.

⁶⁴ US Department of State, [Joint Press Availability](#), 16 June 2023

⁶⁵ NATO Spokesperson Oana Lungescu (@NATOpres), [Twitter](#), 26 March 2023 (accessed 28 June 2023)

⁶⁶ NATO, [Press conference](#), 16 June 2023

⁶⁷ EU External Action Service, [Press release](#), 26 May 2023

⁶⁸ EU High Representative Josep Borrell Fontelles (@JosepBorrellF), [Twitter](#), 26 March 2023 (accessed 28 June 2023)

Let us be clear:

No other country has raised the prospect of nuclear use in this conflict.

No one is threatening Russia's sovereignty.

It is Russia who has violated the UN Charter by invading another sovereign country.

President Putin's announcement on 25 March is his latest attempt to intimidate and coerce. This has not worked and will not work. We will continue to support Ukraine's efforts to defend itself.⁶⁹

Following events at the end of June 2023 which saw the leader of the Wagner Group, Yevgeny Prigozhin, exiled to Belarus after [attempting an armed rebellion in Russia](#), questions were once again raised over the role of Belarus in the Ukraine conflict and as a host for Russian nuclear weapons. In response, then Foreign Secretary James Cleverly said:

It is, of course, a deep concern when we see Russia trying to use Belarus as a sort of satellite state or, indeed, a place to put its nuclear weapons. We keep that under constant review, and we make sure, in the strongest possible terms, that Belarus is aware of the international concerns about its behaviour.⁷⁰

China

As outlined above, the March 2023 announcement by the Kremlin came only days after a joint statement by the Russian and Chinese Presidents calling on all nuclear weapon states not to deploy such weapons beyond national territories.

In response to Russia's subsequent announcement a spokesperson for the Chinese Foreign Ministry did not reference that statement and instead called on all sides to work towards peace in Ukraine:

In January last year, the leaders of the five nuclear-weapon states released a joint statement, in which they affirmed that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought and stressed the importance of the avoidance of war between nuclear-weapon states and the reduction of strategic risks. Under the current circumstances, all sides need to focus on making diplomatic efforts towards a peaceful settlement of the Ukraine crisis and work together for deescalation.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, [Speech at the UN Security Council](#), 31 March 2023

⁷⁰ [HC Deb 26 June 2023](#), c19

⁷¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, [Regular press conference](#), 27 March 2023

3.6

Questions over their deployment status

For all the discussion and rhetoric surrounding the movement of Russian tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus, experts have continued to question whether such warheads have in fact been deployed to the country.

In a briefing for the Brookings Institution in May 2024, analyst Pavel Baev said that, despite infrastructure upgrades in Belarus, there is no “open-source evidence” that tactical nuclear warheads have been moved there. This is a view shared by analysts Hans Kristensen and Matt Korda, both in an assessment for the SIPRI Yearbook 2024 and in their Nuclear Notebook on Russia in March 2024.⁷² In that latter briefing, they noted:

there are still several unknowns surrounding the status and logistical challenges of deploying Russian nuclear weapons to Belarus [...]

So far, we have not seen conclusive visual evidence to pinpoint where Russian nuclear warheads are being stored and 12th GUMO personnel are deployed in Belarus, if indeed they are in the country at all.⁷³

The 12th GUMO is the department within Russia's Ministry of Defence responsible for maintaining and transporting Russia's nuclear weapons.

4

A new Russian nuclear doctrine

The latest move in Russia's campaign of nuclear pressure was the announcement by President Putin in November 2024 of a new nuclear doctrine for the Russian Federation.⁷⁴

Although announced seemingly in response to the US administration authorising Ukraine's [use of Western-supplied long-range missiles against military targets in Russia](#), the main changes to Russia's nuclear doctrine had already been outlined by President Putin in a meeting of the Russian Security Council in September 2024.⁷⁵

⁷² SIPRI, [World Yearbook 2024: World Nuclear Forces \(PDF\)](#), p.295 and Hans Kristensen, Matt Korda, Eliana Johns and Mackenzie Knight, [Nuclear Notebook: Russian nuclear forces 2024](#), 7 March 2024

⁷³ . Matt Korda, Eliana Johns and Mackenzie Knight, [Nuclear Notebook: Russian nuclear forces 2024](#), 7 March 2024

⁷⁴ A copy is available, in Russian, from the Russian government's [Official Portal of Legal Information](#). An unofficial English translation has been made available by the [Middle East Media Research Institute](#)

⁷⁵ President of Russia, [Meeting of the Security Council standing conference on nuclear deterrence](#), 25 September 2024

Addressing that meeting, President Putin said that it was necessary to update and “adjust the provisions” of the 2020 document to reflect “current realities”.⁷⁶

In keeping with the 2020 nuclear doctrine, the updated 2024 version does not advocate “first use” in a nuclear scenario but it does not rule out first use in response to a conventional attack under certain circumstances either. Specifically, the new doctrine:

- Officially brings Belarus under the Russian nuclear umbrella.
- Justifies the use of nuclear weapons against conventional aggression that poses a critical threat to Russian/Belarusian sovereignty and/or territorial integrity. Previous documents had outlined nuclear use when [the very “existence of the state”](#) was threatened.⁷⁷ Many analysts consider such language to have lowered Russia’s threshold for nuclear use.⁷⁸
- States that an aggression against Russia by any non-nuclear state with the participation, or support, of a nuclear state, will be regarded as a joint attack on the Russian Federation.

Many commentators have interpreted the timing of the change as part of Russia’s ongoing campaign to put pressure on the West over its support for Ukraine and suggested that the new doctrine does not offer anything fundamentally new.⁷⁹ As Andreas Umland of the Swedish Institute of International Affairs observed in an opinion piece for The Kyiv Independent in September 2024:

Russian threats – whether verbal or written – are not previews of actual actions. They are part of a psychological warfare campaign aimed at undermining Ukraine’s defense. Putin’s recent announcement of changes to Russia’s military doctrine is just another move in this high-stakes PR game.

A decision to use nuclear weapons would be driven more by political calculations than by doctrinal documents. If the Kremlin believes that using such weapons would enhance its power, it may act – regardless of the specific

⁷⁶ President of Russia, [Meeting of the Security Council standing conference on nuclear deterrence](#), 25 September 2024

⁷⁷ [Basic Principles of State Policy in the Area of Nuclear Deterrence](#), June 2020 and [the Russian Military Doctrine](#) (PDF), 2014

⁷⁸ See Rishi Paul “[Bluff and bluster: Why Putin revised Russia’s nuclear doctrine](#)”, European Leadership Network, 25 November 2024; Steven Pifer, “[How credible is Russia’s evolving nuclear doctrine?](#)”, Brookings Institution, 14 November 2024 and William Alberque, “[Putin’s new nuclear doctrine: It’s my arsenal and I’ll strike if I want to](#)”, Breaking Defense, 20 November 2024

⁷⁹ Heather Williams, “[Why Russia is changing its nuclear doctrine now](#)”, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 27 September 2024; “[We can’t be cowed by Russia’s new nuclear doctrine. It’s business as usual](#)”, The Moscow Times, 27 September 2024 and Hans Kristensen, “[Putin’s updated conditions for nuclear use are not so new](#)”, Russia Matters Blog, 27 September 2024. See also Library research briefing, [Russia’s use of nuclear threats during the Ukraine conflict](#)

wording in official texts. Political utility, rather than legal obligation, will guide Moscow's choices.⁸⁰

William Alberque, a former Director of the NATO Arms Control, Disarmament and Non-Proliferation Center shares this view, arguing that “the 2024 doctrine is likely closer to Russia’s actual nuclear doctrine, which is that Russia will use nuclear weapons whenever Putin thinks it necessary to do so”.⁸¹

Changes to Russia’s nuclear doctrine have been labelled as “irresponsible rhetoric” by both the US and UK Governments.⁸² In a speech at RUSI at the beginning of December 2024, UK Chief of the Defence Staff, Admiral Sir Tony Radakin said that there “is only a remote chance of a significant direct attack or invasion by Russia on the United Kingdom” and that Russia “knows the response would be overwhelming, whether conventional or nuclear”.⁸³

The new Russian nuclear doctrine, Russian nuclear capabilities and its nuclear modernisation programme are examined in further detail in Library briefing: [Nuclear weapons profile: Russia](#).

⁸⁰ Andreas Umland, [“Opinion: is Russia’s new nuclear doctrine a game of bluff or a shift in strategy?”](#), The Kyiv Independent, 30 September 2024

⁸¹ William Alberque, [“Putin’s new nuclear doctrine: It’s my arsenal and I’ll strike if I want to”](#), Breaking Defense, 20 November 2024

⁸² US Department of Defense, [Press briefing](#), 19 November 2024; PA Media, [@PA](#), X (formerly Twitter), 19 November 2024 (accessed 19 December 2024) and Prime Minister’s Office, [PM Statement to the House of Commons on the G20 and COP29 summits](#), 21 November 2024

⁸³ Ministry of Defence, [Chief of the Defence Staff RUSI lecture](#), 4 December 2024

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